

Vicars Report
APCM October 2020

My verbal comments to the APCM in April 2019 accompanying my report came under 3 categories:

Change
Thankfulness
Fear

18 months on I thought we would be in a very different place and in many ways we are, but not in any sense in a way we would have expected. Those 3 categories form the basis of much of this report although I would want to change the order.

First thankfulness.

This whole report could simply be a record of thanks. The Ministry Reports for this year form not only the basis of our collective thanksgiving to God for all that He has done in our life together but also highlights the enormous contribution of so many of this community.

One group not to have a formal report but whose contributions have been incalculable has been those who have been enabling our worship since the lockdown in March. We have been blessed as a church with a brilliant tech team – Tim, Brandon, Phil, Chris, Andy and others – who have been able to put together services which enabled us to sing in our own homes led by a range of fabulous musicians from across our services. Post-lockdown the tech team have gone further, still enabling us with online services whilst also enabling live streaming from church. I am deeply grateful for the team and the musicians especially for the amount of time and effort they have put into each of these services alongside our leaders, preachers, readers and intercessors.

Alongside our Sunday worship has been the offering of daily prayer three times a day each weekday. This rhythm of prayer has been provided by an ever-increasing group who have offered themselves in leading these services. It has been a delight to see new gifts and abilities flourishing in this area, not least among lay members. Our Wednesday communion services have taken on new significance for those attending during this time, whilst the work of Kate Swann,

Zoe Matthias and our youth missionaries in providing both digital and physical services and worship has been remarkable.

In our pastoral life together I am indebted to Mary Anne Freer in her co-ordination and arrangements of all those who have made calls during lockdown. Underpinned by the pastoral work of small groups, the telephone calls have been an opportunity to pray and be prayed for, carry one another's burdens, share in joys and co-ordinate practical tasks in everything from shopping and prescription pick ups through to lifts to hospital appointments, pastoral walks and welcome.

There are many more thanks, some more which follow below and alongside those I personally want to thank the staff team (along with Jamie Harrison who has joined us most days) whose work – especially since March - has been as inspiring to me as it has been enabling of the whole church. Our team of clergy and readers have continued to serve and lead us in worship and word, with our curates Maeve and Claire developing their gifts and services to the benefit of us all. The PCC has served with wisdom and support and guidance whilst the wardens, Mary Anne, Chris Jelley and Alan Smith have - as is so often the case – worked behind the scenes faithfully and consistently in ensuring the smooth running of our life together.

Secondly Change

Last year talk of change related to changes of service times. Whilst last year that seemed like a big issue in our life together, the events of the past 18 months place much of that now into perspective.

2019 was the first year of our life as a designated “resource church” with the recruitment of new MEVS, our first stipendiary curate in many years, two youth missionaries and a part -time communications post all funded by the Strategic Development Fund. I am delighted that this year those appointments have been accompanied by the arrival of Richard Briggs as the Prior of the Community of St Cuthbert. Richard's appointment represents an answer to prayer and God's faithfulness.

Our youth Missioners, Leanne Davis and Joe Cottrell have moved on to new posts after just under a year with us. I am grateful to them for the service they offered during their time with us. We are currently advertising for a new Youth Missioner and Youth Pastor. In the interim James Cochran and Catriona Inglis

continue the pattern of weekly Thursday meetings (online), Sunday morning Materials and Sunday evening meetings (online/physical when allowed).

One of the major impacts of COVID has been to focus on how we might deliver “normal” events in a new environment. Already plans for freshers and Christmas have been severely impacted as has our children and young peoples work. This has led to a focus on basic delivery requiring more effort and having an impact on specifically missional events and outreach in the way that we would have previously done.

We continue to see both challenges and encouragement.

Following the lockdown, since July we have been open for individual prayer two mornings a week and over August introduced mid-week communion. Our first Sunday service took place on 6th September. As with many churches we have experienced multiple challenges in trying to do this and expect things will change as we slowly proceed. The amount of energy, planning and effort to do this, on me and the team as a whole, was considerable.

In terms of Ministry Areas the impact on our ability to run children’s groups especially and children’s ministry has been a challenge. With over 50 5-11 year olds it was always going to be a challenge to make arrangements to enable regular worship physically for families.

In this Kate Swann has done excellent work with the team of volunteers in enabling Pyjama Church to become a regular part of our offering and has seen new families take part. It was wonderful to hear that the Diocesan Officer for Children’s work help Kate’s work up as an exemplar to other churches in the diocese as to what could be achieved.

Zoe Matthias has also had to change plans on a number of occasions as COVID guidance and regulations have changed. Zoe has done some excellent work in restarting student night for our existing students, recruiting a new team for this year’s work and also establishing Spiritual Support Groups. Freshers week will be a challenge not only to deliver but more widely in how we ensure those coming to Durham from home churches find a spiritual home in Durham rather than staying online with their existing church families.

In all of our physical coming back together I am indebted to the work of both the staff team and the logistics group. The logistics group has met a number of

times as we have sought to reopen the church for physical activity. I am grateful to the group, and especially to Ann & Simon Lipscombe and Kate Dawson, for their commitment in producing Risk Assessment after Risk Assessment and for their safe implementation. The staff team, along with the wardens, have ensured that the church has been opened for private prayer on Saturdays and Wednesdays.

There will continue to be challenges with risk assessments and making the church safe including staff working from church, Gateway, coffee lounge and other activities.

In all of this we must balance the desire to be open and the missional opportunities that come from that with the duty, both moral and legal, to ensure our church is safe.

Finally Fear.

“Fear” as such would be overdoing it. COVID has already brought with it a number of challenges which we have met. However there are two issues looming which are a cause for concern.

(i) Attendance

Measuring attendance in a digital age is tricky and it has been difficult to assess how many people are engaging with our services, over what platforms and, for instance, how many people in a household watch a service which could simply be recorded as one person on youtube.

Whichever way we manage to look at the figures there has been a general downward trend on Sunday engagement since March when our digital figures were through the roof whilst at the same time daily prayer numbers have gone up but not in such a way as to offset Sunday numbers.

(ii) Finance

As our financial report shows we are facing a decline in income both through giving and also through trading income in terms of the coffee lounge, church hires etc. We are currently looking at a budget shortfall of £30-50K by the end of the year.

Alongside these concerns there are also encouragements.

Encouragements

(iii) Prayer

We have seen a sustained presence at morning, midday and evening prayer offices and in addition have been able to include a larger group of people in leading prayers. This has seen growth for those leading as well as providing a regular rhythm and discipline of prayer for a core number. In addition the increased regularity of church wide prayer nights has been matched by a solid attendance.

(iv) Alpha Online:

We have run our first online Alpha course during lockdown which from first attendances in the mid-teens has ended up with a core of 9 participants. The final week took place in September and many of those who attended have asked to continue in fellowship at Nics in small groups after an excellent course run by Claire Elwood and David Lucas.

(v) Testimonies & Faith Stories

As part of our online services we have been encouraging church members to give their testimonies and to learn how to tell their faith stories. This has been a real encouragement to the whole community as well as enabling many people to share their faith story for the first time. If you haven't yet considered contributing your own faith story please do. There will be an opportunity to undertake a training course together on sharing our story if this would be considered helpful.

(vi) HoTS

Healing on the Streets continues as a ministry and continues to reach out to new people including potential for one couple who are seeking to be married and have their children baptised and also another couple who through meeting on the streets and being prayed for have begun attending online services. The current restrictions on gathering will impact upon our ability to continue this ministry at this time but its fruit is already being seen.

(vii) Ordinands

After the exceptional experience last year of 6 members of St Nics having started ordination training in 2020, 3-5 people are currently in conversation for going

to interview in 2021. If 3 people were to be recommended for training this would mean that 10 people from Nics would have been recommended for ordination training during a three year period.

As we know the most oft-repeated command in the Bible is not to fear, often followed by the words “because I am with you”.

The Next Six Months

The challenges of COVID are no reason for us not to believe that God is still moving and working His purposes out amongst us.

If the period from March – September 2020 represented steep learning curves for us all then the period from September 2020 – September 2021 will be a period where learning curves develop and where we must be mindful of entering a new phase for our mission as a church over the next year.

Four areas stand out for me:

Physical Activity

Digital Activity

Pastoral Activity

Justice Activity

Physical Activity:

We are unlikely to be in a position to meet together as we were at the start of 2020 until the end of 2021. That estimate is based on living with COVID without a widely available vaccine until this time next year. Even at that time it is likely that the fear engendered by COVID, not least amongst those who consider themselves or their household to be vulnerable in one form or another, will mean our physical gatherings will not be as they were for a considerable time to come.

Whilst this is currently most evident during our Sunday gatherings the impact upon our ministries – children & families, student and youth will be particularly felt. The impact upon our work with FE colleges has been to undo most if not all of the work done over the past 18 months which will in turn have an impact on our work as a disciplining church amongst this age group.

Digital Activity:

One of the blessing we have encountered as a church has been the high and consistent quality of our online offering. Whilst it is of course the case that what we offer online and digital cannot ever be a substitute for in person activity, we have been blessed with the skills of our tech team and also our musicians in being able to do this well. We have also grown in our online prayer offering both in terms of daily prayer and church prayer meetings.

Whatever the future shape of our ministry when we return physically it is clear it must be matched by a high quality digital offering which will enable people to meet God in this new way and to join us as members of the Nics Community.

This will require investment in a number of ways as we seek to deliver not only regular services but new digital ways of being church including podcasts and new online offerings. This is also an opportunity to ensure what we broadcast from church is of the same high level of our pre-recorded services.

Part of ensuring we are able to do this will be to consider the decision to re-order the church. Doing so at a time when work will be least disruptive to the physical life of the church makes sense as does doing so in a way that means broadcasting our services will be done in such a way that increases the quality of our offering.

The PCC will discuss the vision and requirements for any such re-ordering.

Pastoral Activity

During the past 6 months Mary Anne Freer has done an incredible job in leading our pastoral response. Along with other pastoral volunteers Mary Anne has been faithful in ensuring that all members of the church have received regular pastoral calls which have included an opportunity to pray together. Since the lockdown was lifted, combined with people having time away in August, it has been more difficult to contact people directly in this way.

Our small groups have always provided pastoral care as part of their role and have implicitly carried out this role as part of our pastoral systems. Going forward it seems to make sense for these small groups (whether house groups or Spiritual support Groups) to now take on this role in a more explicit fashion with Small Group Leaders working alongside Mary Anne and myself in providing

pastoral care and oversight. As part of this we will revamping our small group system including inviting those who are not members of small groups - both those new to the church and those who have been here for a while – to join a group. As well as starting new groups we will be asking some people in existing groups to become members of new groups.

Everyone who is new to the church will be invited to join a group. At least one new Spiritual Support Group has been meeting for a few weeks now in a weekly digital only version and is looking forward to the day when they can meet together physically.

All groups will have access to the Cuthbert study materials which will be written by Richard Briggs so that alongside pastoral care and study the emphasis on missional discipleship can be maintained.

Justice:

One of the temptations during this time is to become inward looking and to become overly focussed and spend all of our energy simply trying to do what we did before or to present substitutes for that. It has been right and proper over the past 6 months for us to concentrate on how we maintained community as a gathered church. However we also need to be aware of the missional imperatives of justice and service which form part of our vision as a church alongside discipleship and evangelism .

The economic impact of COVID is likely to be felt hardest in 2021. The North East is already suffering job losses and economic deprivation. The end of the furlough scheme combined with wider job losses are likely to make the situation even more challenging.

As a church there will be a central question as to how we best respond to the common need and common good. It may be through projects such as ACTS 4:35, the creation of a food bank or a Debt counselling centre. Whatever the shape of the response there will be missional opportunities for us to serve and bless our community and city so that we can live out God's hope to all of the people for whom his Son was sent.

One of the most immediate opportunities which has arisen has been to partnership with the Durham Winter Night Shelter for this coming year. DWNS have requested that they use the Youth Centre as a permanent base for the

night shelter from November 2021 – February 2021. This will provide us with an opportunity to bless the work of the night shelter, which we have supported since its inception three years ago, and also to fulfil our call and vision to live out the Gospel call to the least, the last and the lost.

In the midst of these challenging times there are signs of what God is doing in us, with us and through us in the power the Holy Spirit moving amongst us. In the midst of challenge we hold on to these things, rejoicing and giving thanks. For we know how this story ends. It ends in the triumph of God.

Arun Arora
October 2020